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Archeological Survey of the North End of the Isle of Palms, Charleston County, South Carolina

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Recommended Citation

South, Stanley and Stephenson, Robert L., "Archeological Survey of the North End of the Isle of Palms, Charleston County, South Carolina" (1973). *Research Manuscript Series*. 45.

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Keywords

Excavations, Charleston County, Isle of Palms, South Carolina, Archeology

Disciplines

Anthropology

Publisher

The South Carolina Institute of Archeology and Anthropology--University of South Carolina

Comments

In USC online Library catalog at: <http://www.sc.edu/library/>

ARCHEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF
THE NORTH END OF THE ISLE OF PALMS,
CHARLESTON COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA

by

Stanley South and
Robert L. Stephenson
Research Manuscript Series, No. 53

Prepared by the
INSTITUTE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA
November, 1973

INTRODUCTION

The Institute of Archeology and Anthropology, University of South Carolina was asked by the Sea Pines Company to make an archeological survey of the north end of the Isle of Palms in Charleston County, South Carolina. This request was made by letter of October 1, 1973 from Mr. Dick Wilderman of Sea Pines Company to Dr. Robert L. Stephenson. The Sea Pines Company is planning a development of approximately 1400 acres of the north end of the island, approximately two-thirds of which is marshland and one-third is high ground. In effect this includes nearly all of the island north of the presently existing houses from 42nd Avenue on the west side of Palm Boulevard and from 53rd Avenue on the east side of Palm Boulevard.

The records of the Institute were searched and no archeological sites were found to be on record for this area.

Sea Pines Company requested a preliminary report on this survey by November 15, 1973 and a final report by January 15, 1974. The work schedule for other research by the Institute was such, that the Isle of Palms survey fitted well into the framework of other investigations and thorough surface survey of the area was made during October and November, 1973. In view of the results of the survey made at that time it is possible to combine both the preliminary and the final reports in this present report.

The Institute was pleased to have the opportunity to do this survey for Sea Pines Company and to participate with that company in its concern for archeological resources in areas anticipated for development.

THE SURVEY

Mr. Stanley South, of the Institute staff, and a crew of three spent three days during the latter part of October and early November, 1973 in an intensive surface search of the project area. In addition Mr. South rented a boat for one day in order to reach marsh areas not otherwise accessible. The survey was made by driving to areas where roads and trails permitted and by walking from there to other areas. The boat was used along Cedar Creek and Morgan Creek and around the inland side of the Isle of Palms. The high ground of the island was traversed from end to end in the project area in several places and criss-cross from the beach to the marsh through the entire extent of the area. From the boat, landings were made at any high ground seen and these areas were searched. At selected locations, even though no surface indications suggested a site, small exploratory test holes were excavated into the subsurface sand. It was thought that a buried site might thus be revealed.

The extensive historic research files of Mr. Elias Bull, Historic Preservation Planner of the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Regional Planning Council, were called upon. Mr. Bull could find no record of historic or archeological sites in the area. Local residents in the area were questioned and knew of no shell piles or other evidence of archeological or historic sites in the area. The Office of the State Coordinator of Historic Sites was consulted and no sites are recorded, in the area, on the National Register of Historic Places.

During the entire surface search of this end of the Isle of Palms no sites of archeological or historic significance were located. In two places shell piles resulting from recent dredging operations were found but no pottery or other artifacts were found in association with these shells. These shells clearly do not represent archeological sites. In another place a pile of fresh shells was seen but the shells were so green and fresh as to suggest a recent deposit of within the last decade or so. One unfinished log cabin was located with logs built up to form walls about four feet high. This appears to be a recent effort to build a log cabin by some group such as the Boy Scouts.

As near as can be determined from surface searching of the area of the Sea Pines Company's proposed development on the Isle of Palms there are no archeological or historic sites that will be endangered.

DISCUSSION

This area consists of a beach, back of which is a zone of high sand dunes with a heavy growth of underbrush. The dunes gradually level off to the marsh area on the inland side of the island. Beyond the marsh is open water through which the Intercoastal waterway passes and beyond that several low, marsh islands, more open water, and the mainland. Along this mainland there are several important archeological sites including shell rings, shell middens, and historic sites. Among these are the Auld Shell Ring, the Buzzard's Island Shell Ring, and the Stratton Place Shell Ring; all sites of Archaic Indian occupation of some 3000-4000 years ago. These sites are also related to the Sea Pines Shell Ring and the Skull Creek Shell Rings on Hilton Head Island.

The question arises as to why there apparently are no archeological sites on this sea island when similar environments elsewhere along the South Carolina and Georgia coasts do support archeological sites.

The Isle of Palms appears to be a "growing" island and some of the sand dunes, even though heavily covered with vegetation appear to be slightly migratory. They are moving slightly under pressure of the wind. This would suggest that old surfaces, of several hundred to several thousands years ago, now may be buried by these dunes. If there were sites on those old surfaces they would now be covered under several feet of dune sand. Only major earth-moving operations would reveal them.

In view of this potential for deeply buried sites it is strongly recommended that when construction begins on the Sea Pines project and extensive quantities of dune sand are moved, that care be exercised to watch for buried archeological remains. If shell deposits, pottery, or other artifacts and cultural remains are seen beneath this sand the Institute should be notified immediately.

It is also possible that this area has never been occupied; that it just was not a suitable environment for prehistoric occupation. Perhaps hurricanes, shifting sand, weather, or other factors made it more desirable to stay along the mainland. Such is certainly the case in areas along parts of the North Carolina coast. If this is, indeed, the situation on this end of Isle of Palms it might be a factor that present-day developers should consider in their planning.

Whatever the reason may be for it, there are no known archeological or historic sites in the project area as determined by a search of the records and a search of the surface of the ground. The archeological

and historic considerations are therefore adequately satisfied at this time with the one stipulation mentioned above. If archeological material is found in the course of construction the Institute should be notified immediately.